Rex Buchanan: The date is May 22, 2019. It's approximately 1:00 p.m., and we're at the home of John and Joan Strickler in Manhattan, Kansas. I'm Rex Buchanan, former director of the Kansas Geological Survey, and today, I'll interview John Strickler who served the state for many years in a variety of roles. John is professor emeritus of the Kansas Forest Service at Kansas State University. During John's thirty-five-year career with the Forest Service, he served as Associate State Forester and as Acting State Forester.

From 1987 to 1989, John served as Governor Mike Hayden's special assistant for environment and natural resources. During his time with Hayden, John served as a liaison to the legislature, working to obtain the initial funding for the Kansas Water Plan. John provided leadership, addressing Kansas's water issues with an emphasis on the important role of riparian forests and wetlands and protecting water quality.

While serving in the Hayden administration, John worked with the governor to create the cabinet level Department of Wildlife and Parks. John served two governors, Mike Hayden, and Bill Graves, as Acting Secretary of Wildlife and Parks during those governors' national searches for their respective permanent secretaries.

After leaving state service, John continued to work in the field of natural resources. As a member of the Kansas Forest Service Advisory Council, he was a founding member of the Kansas chapter of the Nature Conservancy and a board member of the Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams.

John, thanks for agreeing to participate in the Kansas Oral History project.

John Strickler: My pleasure.

RB: It's really my pleasure to be here today because I consider John a good friend of mine, somebody that I've known for longer than either one of us can remember and somebody that I both admire and appreciate the contributions of. So, I think he's a particularly important person to have these conversations with.

John, that background talked about really sort of how you got involved, your involvement in the Forest Service for a number of years, and then it talks about your service with [Governor] Mike Hayden, but it doesn't explain how you got involved, that is, why you? I mean, that's not a typical role for somebody in the Kansas Forest Service to take on. How did that wind up happening?

JS: Well, I might say that a lot of what I did for the Forest Service was keeping track of if there was any legislation that would affect the Forest Service and our natural resources in general. I was very lucky to get acquainted with Mike Hayden early, in fact, the first year he was in the legislature. I did work on his campaign, and one of the things that Mike was interested in is the natural resource issue. He has a degree in wildlife biology from both Kansas State University and Fort Hays [State] University.

We became personal friends in the early days of his legislative work, and we worked together on a number of issues. We knew that when he became governor, one of the key elements of his campaign was that he wanted to have someone on his staff who served as a liaison to the natural resource organizations. When he was elected, he asked me if I would be interested in that position.

The university was very agreeable about it. They allowed me to take two years off and work with Mike in the natural resource issues.

RB: Let's back up a little bit. One of the things we didn't mention in that introduction was your role with KACEE [Kansas Association for Conservation and Environmental Education], the Kansas environmental education organization that you were instrumental in helping found and supported for a number of years. Did you work with Mike [Hayden] when he was in the legislature for legislative recognition of KACEE? Is that how you first got to know him?

JS: Yes. Actually. It was, Rex. I had been active with this organization, KACEE, the Kansas Association for Conservation and Environmental Education. When I worked on that, one of the early things was to try and get through a resolution in support of environmental education. It took, I believe, three years to get it, but eventually we did get that resolution through.

 

RB: I guess part of my point in bringing it up is that education has always been near and dear to your heart. I assumed it had to be, or you wouldn't have been involved—originally that organization was the Kansas Advisory Council for Environmental Education. That statutory role was one of providing advice in addition to everybody else, the [State] Board of Education, I think, or the [Kansas] Department of Education.

JS: Yes. I feel that one of the major reasons I got involved with education is because I was working in the Forest Service and dealing with natural resources all the time. I became convinced with all the problems we had and the lack of attention that natural resources and environmental issues were getting, that education really is the key. For that reason, I did spend a significant part of my efforts while I worked with the Forest Service in education.

RB: I've heard Mike talk about the fact that he felt like he could have more of an impact on the direction of environmental issues in politics than he could have if he had become a run-of-the-mill biologist. I assume you must have a little bit of the same kind of feeling, too, or you wouldn't have been willing to engage in the political process to the extent that you did.

JS: Well, that's right. Mike always told the story that when he served in Vietnam, went back and worked on his master's degree, and he frequently would tell it at speeches he was giving that when he got back from Vietnam and was in school, he went around visiting with friends of his that he knew in the wildlife area, and he said the story was almost always the same, “I really like my work, but nobody pays any attention to it. So, I decided that if I was going to have an impact, I would do it as a legislator.” That was an important part of his interest.

RB: Let me ask you one more question about that, and then we'll talk about the actual work that you did for him. You said that you helped with his campaign. I assume it was the gubernatorial campaign, not the House campaign.

JS: Uh huh.

 

RB: Well, even that's a little bit unusual for somebody in the sciences or natural resources. Getting involved with a political campaign doesn't come naturally for most people on that side of the world.

JS: Well, it wouldn't be for me except Mike's story about why he became involved, that was a rare instance that a wildlife or natural resource professional got involved in politics with the success that he had.

RB: So, in other words, you might not have taken the same career trajectory for just anybody. When he came along, that sort of resonated with you.

JS: I think it was very rare, I found, when I worked those two years, at how few governors really had any of that interest.

RB: Yes. Let's talk about these two years. What two years are we talking about here?

JS: 1987 to 1989.

RB: What are the big issues that you got involved with? Let's start with non-water issues, and then we'll go to the water issues. That's obviously what we're most concerned about.

JS: Yes.

RB: Beyond the water issues, what kinds of things did you get involved with? Anything or was it strictly water?

JS: I became involved with—when he was in the National Governors Association, they had meetings frequently by the governors' staff. When the governors get together, everybody's kind of nicey-nice. So, it was when the staff got together in committees that we were working on, like energy was one of the ones, Mike had an unusual background, as I did, for most of those people that were on the committee. The governors were nicey-nice, I'd say, the staff was where there wasn't any limits on disagreement as well as agreement. That was where the real work went on.

 

RB: Got done. Any other kinds of things that come to mind before we go to the water issues?

JS: Well, there was a lot of work just on representing the governor in meetings and handling all of the correspondence, anything that had to do at all with natural resource issues came to me first. We'd compose the response, and then Mike would view it.

RB: Let's talk a little bit about water. The water plan funding is obviously an important story here. Is that something he was interested in, and you were interested in right out of the chute? Did that evolve? How did that come about?

JS: Yes, it was. The Water Plan, the Water Office was created legislatively in 1984. There wasn't many real effort going on in terms of funding. The plan, I was impressed with Joe Harkins and the people on the Water Plan staff, but you have a plan, and there's no money to implement any of the things. I always felt like Kansas was way ahead in the area of water than a lot of states. But still except for paying for the Water Plan staff, there was no money for implementing it at all.

RB: Just the Water Office staff.

JS: Yes. They had the system set up, I thought very well with the Water Authority that served in an advisory and actual policy along with the staff, but no money. Everybody would agree that water was an important issue. They just didn't seem to want to pay for it.

RB: Where did the funding plan proposal come from? Did that come from Hayden? Did it come from you? Did it come from staff, legislators?

JS: It came from a lot of people. There was a legislator chairing the [House] Committee on Natural Resources named [Representative] Dennis Spaniol. Dennis was really interested in water issues. It was a natural thing for his committee. There had been talk in the previous two years that we needed to bite the bullet and fund the Water Plan, and Mike was very strong in that commitment, that he wanted to see it.

 

There were a lot of different groups that had supported it. They all agreed on the importance of the Water Plan and the Water Office. The only problem was, they didn't agree on where the money was going to come from. You had two main viewpoints. The legislators that were strong on oil and gas and those issues, they said, “We need a water plan, but it ought to all come out of State General Fund.” They didn't want fees on them, on the natural resource organizations, and people that also supported it said it ought to be funded by fees, fees on fertilizers, pesticides, various organization, or resources like the rural water districts and all.

You had this big coalition that agreed on the result that we wanted, but they just differed on who was going to pay for it.

RB: Where the money would come from. Was there money from—the water plant funding from fees on municipality water as well?

JS: Yes.

RB: Not just rural water.

JS: There were fees on industrial water, municipal water, and I think it was businesses or corporations on their use of water.

RB: Once that proposal was out there, how did that process work?

JS: In 1988, even in 1987, there were some real serious discussions saying, “We've got to do this.” The Farm Bureau was a very influential organization, and originally, they were in the category of “We want the State General Fund to pay for it.” The lobbyists, which there were a few back then, working for natural resource organizations, had that same attitude. It ought to come out of the State General Fund, but also there should be fees on some of these areas to help support them.

 

In '88, nothing much happened, but there was quite a bit of discussion in the Natural Resources Committee in the House. Mike Hayden strongly wanted this done. He assigned to me to do everything we could, and he could to create a funding source. I remember in the period before 1989, the Governor and I talked about it and set up a meeting in his office with every organization that had much clout, like the Sierra Club and those organizations, but also the Farm Bureau, the oil and gas business, and they set up this meeting that the rule was—because everybody wanted to talk to the Governor about this, but he'd be hearing the same story, one after another.

He set up this meeting with all of these organizations, and they had — I believe it was about five minutes or five to seven minutes, something like that, but everybody else had to sit and listen to what it was, why the fees of the General Fund should be. It was a very interesting meeting. I don't think very often those competing organizations really ever sat down and talked to some people that were on other side of the fence. So at least after that meeting, we knew where everybody stood.

RB: Was the decision to go on the fee side, was that a consensus that evolved over time?

JS: Well, it was. There were a number of meetings with some of the key lobbyists on both sides. To me, it was surprising that there were three or four lobbyists working in support of this. You knew the Farm Bureau and the Cattlemen's Association, all of those organizations were against the fees. There were a lot of small meetings with certain legislators, Dennis Spaniol, the chair of that committee, was pretty strong for it.

After the meeting where everybody got to hear, it was obvious this was not going to make everybody happy, but as we formulated a plan that really -- eventually we split it in half. Half would come out of the State General Fund and the lottery money. Mike originally had suggested that the lottery ought to be the basis for the whole Water Plan, but there were several legislators that flat would not consider that because they had their eyes on that lottery money for other programs, like business development and all of that.

Finally, it was interesting, the Farm Bureau had been strongly opposed to it, but they began to see that if there aren't some fees involved, they're not going to go anywhere. The Farm Bureau actually came over

 

to our side on a combination of fees and General Fund. I was quite amazed that they did that, and they caught quite a bit of flak over that.

One of the senators, it came through the House fairly early in the '89 session. They had a bill and passed it actually. One of the most powerful senators was Senator Ross Doyen. Ross had promised to all the organizations, including the Farm Bureau, that he'd oppose it. As the jockeying went on or around getting votes, we had Ross that opposed it, and Ross was a well-thought-of and powerful senator. When the Farm Bureau switched, we thought, “Well, now will it be okay?” but Ross stood on principle. “I promised I would not approve the Water Plan,” and he flat would not do it.

Eventually it came down to, during the last couple of days of the session, there was that Water Plan bill sitting there, just waiting. We got it passed in the House, but how were we going to get through the Senate? So, there was a lot of working on taking on senators one on one and trying to influence them to change. We actually at one point thought we had the votes minus two. If we'd get two votes, we'd have it.

The last day of the legislative session, I was on the floor working and several of the other governor's staff were on working to get two votes. One legislator we thought had agreed. He supported the Water Plan, but he just couldn't quite bring himself to go with that. But we both talked to him that day. We thought he said he was on, would switch. We were waiting for one other legislator, senator, to agree, and finally the woman on Mike's staff gave the high sign. We got his.

We had the twenty-one votes we needed. So, they started running down the list, checking off, and they hit this one that we were sure had agreed to vote, and he voted no. There was a what they say, a “Call of the House.” They lock the doors. No one could leave. They could enter, but they couldn't leave.

Senator Gus Bogina had had heart surgery just before the end of the session. Mike talked to Gus. He was at home recovering. He said, “Would you come if we could get you there?” Gus said yes, he would. The Highway Patrol picked Gus up and brought him into the Capitol, and Gus walked into the Senate and voted “aye” right then and there, so we had it. That was the last action of the legislature. I think one hour after that, both houses adjourned.

 

RB: When you had these conversations with legislators, what was your leverage? What could you say to try to get them to vote for this bill?

JS: We talked to them about the importance of water. This is a real moment in the history of Kansas, if they would fund the Water Plan. Everyone agrees that we needed it. It was just a question of who was going to pay for it. The compromise that came out was following that split model. I haven't always agreed with the Farm Bureau on everything they take on, but I would give them credit. I knew they were under a lot of pressure when they switched. The president of the Farm Bureau was in Washington, DC, on an issue. We set it up where Mike would call him and talk to him. We still didn't know exactly what they were going to do.

The first thing in the morning, the lobbyist with the Farm Bureau, I got up early and met with him. I didn't know whether they were going to go with us or not. They were getting a lot of pressure from the agricultural arena to not do it on fees. But the Farm Bureau decided, we thought they might change, but they didn't. Once they supported it, then we all felt pretty good that it was doable. We just had to swing some votes.

RB: A couple more things about that. It seems pretty apparent that that funding would not have survived without the direct intercession of the Governor.

JS: Absolutely.

RB: If the Governor hadn't cared about it so deeply, nothing would have happened.

JS: That was one of Mike's highest priorities. I think that's right. What we ended up with was an eight-million-dollar make-up of General Fund money and four million State General Fund, no, six million of the State General Fund and two million was the lottery money. The other half, about eight million, would be funded out of all the broad base of fees. I think if we couldn't have gotten the idea of splitting it, we never would have gotten it.

 

RB: One other thing, and this flows a little bit out of the conversation we had with all this with Joe Harkins, Harkins talks about sort of an era of—I'm not quite sure of the best way to put it—of legislators who were coming together to look for a solution as opposed to scoring political points, that they were genuinely trying to come up with a solution to an important problem, and in some respects, as you talk about the role of the Farm Bureau, it's not just legislators. It's nongovernmental organizations that played into that as well. I assume you would agree with Joe's take on that.

JS: Right, I would. If the governor had not put his personal commitments to this, I don't think we would have made it. I think he and the fact that everybody agreed that water is going to be a coming issue, and if we don't do something like this, we're not dealing with our true responsibilities.

RB: You've talked a little bit about [Senator] Ross Doyen and [Representative] Dennis Spaniol, and to certain extent, [Senator] Gus Bogina, I don't know, I guess sort of comes along at an opportune time to be part of this story. He's associated with budget issues but not necessarily natural resource issues. Any other sort of key people that were important? Who was the lobbyist for Farm Bureau at that point? Was it Bill Fuller?

JS: Bill Fuller was the one I worked with.

RB: He was the lobbyist. He had been in the legislature.

JS: He had been in the legislature himself. Bill made a pretty strong commitment and managed to bring the Farm Bureau on. I think if that had not happened, I don't think we'd have—

RB: Anybody else like that come to mind in this process? Obviously, I didn't mention Hayden, but obviously he's central to this whole idea. Any other players that you might not expect that stepped up at opportune times or were involved?

JS: Well, there were a couple. I understood that the legislators were feeling pressure on this. One of the persons we were working pretty hard on was Senator Jerry Moran. Jerry was very much in favor of the Water Plan funding, but he was new in the [Kansas] Senate. I don't know exactly—I talked to Jerry and

 

brought him down to meet with Mike Hayden that morning. We really honestly thought that he had said yes. But when we were going down the roll, and we hit, Jerry said no. There's where the “Call to the House” came on.

Jerry's phone lit up. Jerry just turned his back on it because he knew who was on the other end of the phone. It was Mike calling him. I think Jerry after that—he was pretty brand new at that time, but he probably may have regretted that vote himself

RB: What about—my guess is also that that funding wouldn't have gotten approved if there wasn't some faith within the legislature about the capabilities of the Water Office and the Water Authority. Joe Harkins is obviously in charge of the Water Office at this point. I don't know who the Chair of the Water Authority would have been at that point. Did they play much of a role in this process?

JS: Not that much, but certainly they contributed to it. As you know the way the Water Authority is formed up, it represents conflicting interests. So, part of the Water Authority wanted the fees and part of the Water Authority wanted to stay General Fund.

RB: Now we sort of start to go, as opposed to sort of rehashing or reminiscing, start to look back at what worked and what didn't. Maybe the place to start is, one obvious question is, could you get that same kind of funding passed today?

JS: I wouldn't bet on it at all. I'm not sure you could get them to agree to anything.

RB: Well, and some proof for that is the fact that the General Fund component of that, the nondedicated part of that funding in effect then, as other governors came along, other legislators came along, they got swept up.

JS: That's right. With all the effort that went into getting that Water Plan funded, sixteen million, and should have, at least from me, I was naive enough to think that “Well, we've got the job done.” The reality though is that within two or three years after the Water Plan fund, it started that General Fund and the lottery money looked more and more attractive for other conflicting interests.

 

There weren't very many years where that full amount was out there. They'd whittle on it, a couple of million here, a couple of million there. Maybe the governor came in and was supportive of it for a while, but when they got into the haggling over a lot of other things to pay for, the Water Plan, there were times there was very little money there.

RB: In effect, the answer is, could it happen today? It's pretty clear it couldn't happen today because a lot of those legislators couldn't even protect the money that the legislators, wouldn't even protect the money that had already been designated. In fact, if it wasn't dedicated funding, it was liable to be swept up and used by them.

JS: That's right. The only way that anybody knows, at least as far as I do, how that can be protected is put into the Constitution. There's been discussion about that, and I'm not even sure that you could get them to hold the line on that.

RB: As you look back on that process in retrospect, it would be easy to look back and say, “All of that should have been dedicated funding from fees because then it wouldn't have been out there as a tempting target for legislators.”

JS: I would say I understand that.

RB: You're saying it probably wouldn't have passed if it would have all been fees.

JS: No. I don't think so. Today, that’s still an argument that's going on. The Farm Bureau's very adamant that they—and I understand that, that they made a commitment and then broke that commitment for the good of the Water Office, and they're very protective of those fees. They don't like the idea of paying all fees and not the contribution from the State is the way they look at it, and I can't argue with that too much. It's true.

RB: To a certain extent, this sounds like one of those politics is the art of the possible, and what you all did in that process is what was possible.

 

JS: Yes.

RB: And fees might have been a better way to go in terms of long-term sustainability, but it probably wouldn't have happened if you had gone that way.

JS: So far it isn't. I had a number of legislators tell me that that was in their experience the hardest thing that they ever had to do was dealing with that in terms of the level of controversy and disagreement.

RB: Really?

JS: Yes. Now I doubt it that would—

RB: It wasn't true anymore. But that's interesting. I always tell people, if you really want to get a fight started, talking about changes in Kansas water laws is a good way to get it going, I imagine particularly if you're representing a district from out west, that that's really true. Would you consider that time that you spent in that role in Hayden's administration, was that the single accomplishment, was that the thing you're most proud of spending time on and getting done?

JS: Yes, I would say that. I didn't know what that job would entail when I took it. I got a quick education. There's a lot of things that we did where I personally was involved that were just pretty interesting. People would come up to me, knowing that I worked with the university, and they'd say, “How can you stand all this politics here?” and my answer was that compared to sometimes university politics, it was pretty simple.

[End of File A]

RB: We've talked about the process of developing funding for the State Water Plan, and as you look back on it now, this is thirty years after the fact. Did it achieve what you were hoping for when you went through that process?

 

JS: Frankly, no, because there would be different times they would put some of the money back on the argument that it was needed, and most people would agree. Water is something that everybody agrees is an important issue, but it hasn't yet reached the high level that I think it's going to reach in terms of future issues with water.

RB: Why is that? Why if everybody can agree that water is critical, obviously we all can't live without it, why does it fail to achieve that sort of prominence?

JS: Well, for one thing, a lot of people don't know what that happened to that Water Plan fund. I mean, it's in the budget and everything. I know several times they took all the State General Fund, EDIF [Economic Development Initiative Fund] money. You know, it's hard to keep an issue like to the front. It just continues. I think a lot of people just thought, probably like I did, “Well, we got it. It will be protected.” There is no way to do that.

RB: Is part of the issue here also that water is one of those things that people worry about when it's short or when there's flooding, but in between times—

JS: The only thing that will influence them, the general public I'm talking about, is if they turn on the tap and nothing comes out. Other than that, as long as the water serves the city's inhabitants and the farm people's habitat, they're “What are we worrying about?”

RB: Given that, I guess we can approach this question more broadly, what are the big issues in terms of water that the state has failed to deal with either as a consequence of that lack of funding or not, one way or another?

JS: Well, of course, the biggest single issue is the issue of irrigation. Irrigation creates a demand for water far in excess of any other uses. Yet in our negotiations with that at the time, there were two groups that were totally left out. One would be the irrigators.

RB: Left out from paying the fees is what you mean.

 

JS: Yes. And the other would be the oil and gas industry. Those two sources managed to evade getting into the conversation. I still think when things are, if they ever are resolved on this, it's going to be because the irrigators wake up to, “Hey, there is a really serious issue here.”

RB: And obviously, we're here in Manhattan, the home of the state's ag[griculture] school. You talked about the importance of the Farm Bureau in getting that passed. How successful has the agricultural community then dealt with water issues, would you say? If you identify irrigation water use, primarily I assume we're talking about [inaudible] use out west. Have they come to grips with the issue?

JS: No. I don't think so, really. I mean, sure, individual irrigators have. But collectively, I don't think they have. I think they're—not enough anyway to be a real changing factor in it.

RB: Let's talk about that a little bit in terms of something, this is something I've heard you talk about before, which is people in Kansas say they don't like government, but you would always say, “Well, they must like government because look at all the different levels and entities in government that they have.”

JS: That's true.

RB: That Kansas has almost more governmental entities than almost any other state.

JS: That is true.

RB: One of the driving things in particularly high plains or aquifer usage has been the development of the groundwater management districts. Now those districts are in place prior to the time that you're in the governor's office, but they're in place. Talk about them a little bit in terms of how successfully they've dealt with this issue as one of those units of government.

JS: A few of them have. You have to realize that's not my area. I forget, and you probably know the name of a group up in north-central—

RB: The Sheridan [County] 6, LEMA [Local Enhanced Management Area].

 

JS: LEMA, where they agree to negotiate and work together, but it's interesting to me that that's taken place in the north-central area, and the southwest area is where the greatest problems lie. I don't know, but I don't think we're going to deal with water issues fully unless there's a change in attitude.

RB: That's exactly where I was going. In fact, this is an attitudinal issue. To a certain extent, it comes back to where we started here with education. Is this a failure of education, or do people know a lot about the issue and just don't want to deal with it because of economics, and that shapes their attitude?

JS: A story a like to tell related to that is that people will—I know Kansas State University used to do it. I don't know whether they do now, but they would do a polling survey about what their complaints are. They say, “Well, I don't like people taking me, my irrigation, water, and so on, or whatever the issue is. I don't like them doing that.”

Then they would ask, “Well, given the amount of time that we have on this, what would you consider where money ought to come from?” “Well, it shouldn't be taxes. I want the results to be favorable in taking good care of our water supply,” but then you ask, “Well, how about raising various fees?” “Oh, no, I don't want to do that.” Too many people, that's the reason I got involved in environmental education, in broad categories, they are right thinking, but when it comes down to specifics, it's not. I don't want to sound totally pessimistic.

RB: I've always said when you talk about the ag[riculture] community paying those fees, I've heard people suggest those fees can be really small. I've always said, “You can put as many zeros behind that decimal as you want to, but as long as you eventually get to a 1, and it's .0001, you're probably not going to get much support. So far, that's always been true.

I've got a more general question. Before I go there though, and this may connect with the ag[riculture] perspective, how effective—we were just talking about the groundwater management districts. Have they been successful? And you mentioned the northwestern Kansas Sheridan [County] 6 [LEMA], which is a subset of the northwest Kansas district.

 

JS: I don't think they actually have come to grips with it. You just look at what's happening. You've been out there measuring the water supply potential there, and if you look at it as a real problem, what has happened in the time when I was wrestling with it, well, we've got massive dairies, feed lots coming up, and every major shift just is going to demand more and more water.

RB: I imagine, in their defense, they would say, “But we've become far more efficient in our water use.”

JS: And they have.

RB: And they have, although efficiency doesn't necessarily lead to less water use, either. So, let's shift focus a little bit from local entities and talk about state agencies. I realize some of this is not necessarily in your purview, but you've been in what is in effect a state agency for a long time, and you've got a variety of perspectives. How effective have the state agencies been in this process? Have they done their jobs?

JS: No, not totally. If you talk about water and agencies and interests, water is probably the most complicated thing in terms of everybody has an opinion about it if they're involved with it at all. They're trying to make a coordinated effort out of water issues is pretty tough to do. It's a complicated issue. I could start naming, but you start thinking about all the agencies and organizations that are dependent on that water, and it's tremendous.

RB: Water regulation and activity in the state is split up by various councils, at least seventeen or eighteen different agencies. I've made the argument at times that the legislature has created all of that in order to make regulation more difficult, that they don't want it particularly well regulated. One of the easy ways to do that is to split up responsibility to the point that nobody can quite figure out how to get a handle on it, I think.

JS: I think you're absolutely right.

RB: Which leaves us in sort of a funny spot in terms of—was there any conversation—we talked with Joe Harkins a little bit about [Governor] John Carlin issued an Executive Reorganization Order that would

 

have lumped all those water agencies into sort of a DNR [Department of Natural Resources]. Do you have any of those sorts of conversations with Mike Hayden? Obviously, we can ask him that question. Did that kind of consolidation in order to make more effective management come along?

JS: I think it's probably come up in an informal discussion with Mike. One of the things when I was working with Mike and meeting with other counterparts in my position, there was always a push for going like to some of the northern states like Michigan and Minnesota have gone to an all-purpose natural resource organization.

RB: DNR.

JS: The trouble that I feel in asking around and so on, one of my good friends over in Missouri was a state forester, and there they have supposedly taken politics out of it because it's locked into their constitution. They can't touch it. But reality is the state forester friend of mine said, “It doesn't make a damn difference.” He said, “It's either going to be internal politics, or it's going to be outside. They're the same damn thing. We just spend our time arguing about somewhere, a different organization.”

I don't know. I don't get the impression that a huge organization made up of all of those interests would work. I don't know. I hear that they seem to be.

RB: The agencies themselves never wanted it. They're always out for self-protection, and their various constituencies would say the same thing in the process, which would make it hard to do. In light of all this, where do we go from here? There's this constant struggle to fund water planning funding. We've got sort of a set of machinery in terms of the state government and local government that you would argue has been less than ideal. Where does that leave us? The problem is still out there, maybe worse than ever. What do we do now?

JS: I don't know, Rex. I hate to say this, but I think some things may get worse before they get better. I think the country is so divided right now. It's hard to think of how you're going to get consensus on anything. It's kind of a cop-out.

 

RB: In the conversation with Joe Harkins, Joe talks about the arc of interest in water issues and how it starts in the seventies and peaks in the late seventies and the eighties. But then over time, some of the same—you don't have Mike Hayden in the governor's office. You have folks for whom water is no longer the kind of issue it is, and the arc completes itself going on the other side, and it completes that arc at the same time you have that kind of political divisiveness that you're talking about. it's an even more difficult time that both of those things make it difficult to get things done.

JS: I hate to say this, but I always have to say that environmental education, the goal of it, should be that it's a great mechanism for teaching political thinking. I don't know whether our education system as it is now is teaching critical thinking like it ought to be. When I was talking about that survey that K State [Kansas State University] used to do and probably somebody is doing it now, say “What do you want? Lower taxes or solving all the problems?” “Well, I want solved problems, and I want my taxes low.” That's not critical thinking as far as I'm concerned.

RB: I would say, and maybe to finish up on a little more positive note, that there certainly is a much—that environmental education has a much more prominent role in the curriculum and in the public thinking of students today certainly than it did when you started out in the early seventies or mid-seventies. It's not at all unusual to kids concerned about climate change or recycling or all the kinds of issues, the population growth, that the environmental community talks about, they're almost part of the everyday language. That didn't use to be true.

JS: They do talk about it. I used to do workshops for teachers on the environment, natural resources, and one activity dealing with water that I like to do was asking them to work in teams and find out what people really know about water. Go knock on a door and ask somebody, “Where does your water come from?” In all the time I was doing that, I never got a very positive response. “I turn on the tap, and there it is.”

RB: That's probably as true today as it was thirty or forty years ago.

JS: I suspect it is.

 

RB: That people don't have a better sense of that. I agree with that. Anything else you'd like to touch on before we finish up?

JS: I can't think of anything.

RB: I do appreciate you talking about this. You were a pretty central figure for an awful lot of things that went on at a pretty critical time. It's been good to have this conversation. So, thank you for doing it.

JS: It's been fun.

[End of File B]